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# Observations of a POW Camp Commander

Arthur T. Lobdell

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accounts and could be exchanged for coupons good for purchases in their canteens, or they could authorize donations to approved projects and causes. Kaib and many other POWs gave generously to the nativity scene project.

Financial support also came from another source — the prisoners' canteens. Modeled after the U.S. Army's post exchanges, the canteens were handled by POWs who had run

businesses in Germany. The POWs exchanged coupons for items such as toothbrushes, razor blades, playing cards, soda pop, 3.2 beer (when available), and snacks. Canteens earned a modest profit, and the Geneva Convention had directed that such money be used for the benefit of the captives. A board of American officers and German POWs who supervised the disbursement of canteen funds endorsed Kaib's



## Observations of a POW Camp Commander

**Note:** In these excerpts from a 1946 speech manuscript, Colonel Arthur T. Lobdell provided more details of the Algona POW camp he commanded.

For two and a half years I was commanding officer of German prisoner of war camps in Iowa, Minnesota and the Dakotas. At the beginning of each camp we established the following policies:

... Every American must absolutely control the P.W.'s. The American is to give the orders, the P.W. is to obey or be punished. The prisoners from Algona, who would later return to Germany, would judge the U.S.A. by the way they were treated at Algona.

Each American to be dignified, fair, cold, military and efficient in handling P.W.'s with no fraternizing permitted. Every P.W. was to work every working day and have every hour of his day filled in either with work, studies or recreation and religious services on Sunday.

... Most of the Americans treated their job with dignity, neither fraternizing with the Germans nor maintaining a cocked gun attitude. They simply did a good job treating their prisoners as soldiers and maintaining to the letter those international laws which govern our activities. ...

... Most of the Germans preferred hard routine manual labor, 10 to 12 hours a day. We had one camp in Clinton, Iowa that worked around the clock ... with two shifts, each 12 hours, handling 11 different kinds of products each in 100 lb. sacks. In the north woods the prisoners worked winter and summer and only stopped when it got below 45 degrees below zero; when the axes got too brittle to use. ...

*Anti Nazis* — In July, 1944 I had my first request from behind the barbed wire from a P.W. claiming

to be anti-Nazi. ... He gave me the names of three other P.W.'s, and we soon had 12 from behind the barbed wire. ... Once outside the P.W.'s could not go back for fear of violence by the Nazis. ... [These and other anti-Nazis were later taken to Bird Island, a camp in western Minnesota.]

*S.S.* — In a shipment of P.W.'s to our camp in the winter of 1945 there were 91 S.S. troops. Most of these had been tattooed under their right arm pit. This tattoo was their mark of authority over all Germans. The tattoo gave their individual blood type and assured them of first treatment if wounded. Some said it also had to do with their mating with S.S. women and the production of S.S. children for the permanent governing body in the Nazi plan. The S.S. controlled an organization of about 2,000,000 men and women. Its word was law in Germany. ...

The attitude of these S.S. men was insolent and insubordinate and it was evident that the P.W.'s in our camp stood in fear of these new arrivals. ... I lined [the S.S.] up ... and offered work. No one accepted so I placed them on a restricted diet of bread and water ... under the rule "no work, no eat." ...

*Military Characteristics*— ... Living 50 in a barracks 20' x 100' it was necessary that [the German prisoners] be well-disciplined which they were. Many of the German prisoners had been in service for 10 years and barracks life was the only life they knew.

*May 8th, 1945* — On that day Germany surrendered. Our P.W.'s were generally dejected and with shoulders bent forward, heads down they went about their business. On that day in our base and branch camps 7 P.W.'s went insane. These were a part of the S.S. and Nazi who had never given up



requests. He spent about eight thousand dollars from individual POW donations and canteen profits for material. (Considering that POWs earned eighty cents a day, this represents well over two thousand POWs working a six-day week.)

Kaib recruited five other captives with artistic abilities as his helpers. For almost six months he and his team sculpted and painted

the scene's seventy-five figures. The human and animal statues were constructed of wire frames covered with concrete and coated with plaster of paris. Features and other details were then carved in the plaster and each figure was painted.

Creating and storing the multitude of figures required more space than what was available inside the stockade, and so Kaib and his

hope. All 7 were put in straight jackets and were brought to our base hospital, 3 recovered and 4 were immediately shipped back to Germany.

Immediately after V.E. Day we received 378 who were on the ocean on V.E. Day. This was the sorriest group we ever received. Of the 378 about 90% were estimated to have been wounded, many having been shot both from the front and rear. About 30 in the group were badly infected with itch and scurvy. Included in the group were 75 young boys, many without any hair on their chests, apparently 14 years to 16 years of age and weighing 60 lbs. apiece, also 60 old men, 42 of whom had double hernias and had to be sewed up before they could even do the lightest kinds of work. It was very apparent that Germany had scraped the bottom of the barrel of manpower and further that their Civilian Army was ineffective. We put the young boys in a squad of 7 under an older man and usually worked them on K.P.'s. In their case we put about 30 lbs. of weight on them in the next 6 months. . . .

. . . Physically the 10,000 Germans that passed

through our camp returned to Germany in very much better condition than when they arrived.

. . . [Regarding their "mental condition"] my guess is that 15% went back unchanged. The Nazi teaching, plus the nearly 200 years of Prussian training and theory of the super race were not changed by their internment. I believe that 1,500 from our camp will need careful watching in Germany for many years. As for the remaining 8,500 I believe that they expressed themselves in the following paragraphs of their camp paper [titled *Lagerzeitung*, written by the POW editor, and later translated for Lobdell by Gunnar Norgaard or a Nebraska university professor.]

"We Germans may be glad for two reasons, first the frightful massacre of the last decade has come to an end and the world is moving again. Whatever spasmodic pains in the present toward the past that in the future will also give us the possibility to build up a quiet, laborous life in moderate limits. Second, the United States will get a fabulous prosperity in the next few years and therefore, they will be able economically to support the destroyed Europe.

"Germany has lost the war. Irrevocably and definitely having understood this hard fact and having seen the chance of a total world victory by the Nazi system collapse we may call ourselves lucky finding the powers of the universe in the hands of the democracies, for only these are the guarantees that the immense energies will not be applied for world destroying conquests. Our lives depend upon that. All Germans feeling freedom of fear the most precious of the four freedoms will agree with our statement.

"Germany has lost the war, but it had to lose it to clear the way to the closed resources of the German spirit and German inwardness. If this will give the German people a respect of others['] rights we shall be able to establish a German kind of democracy, but the way there is stony and long, long ———"

POWs pause during winter work.



ORIGINAL FROM ALGONA NATIVITY SCENE





The nativity scene as it first appeared at Christmas 1945. The photo was part of a souvenir folder.

assistants were put on the honor system and allowed to work in the American garrison section. A storage building for sports equipment became Kaib's studio and storehouse.

As November 1945 drew to a close, the German sergeant and his five helpers turned their final attention to the display area. Lobdell had provided an empty warehouse for the diorama. Although Kaib modified his plan to fit the warehouse, the display was much as he had originally visualized it. Indeed, in many ways, it was more elaborate than most supporters had anticipated.

**W**HEN THE nativity scene was completed, Kaib wrote a brief narrative, "A Little Guide Through the Christmas Scene." He labored to find the proper English words and sentence structure for his German thoughts, and in somewhat awkward yet eloquent prose, he expressed what he hoped his audience would see and feel. He began, "The Christmas star—fourteen feet

high [above the manger] — like the star of Bethlehem, its light beams through the darkness and attracts the people from nearby and far away to visit the Christmas scene. This object [scene] has been performed [built] by German prisoners of war . . . from their own earnings[.] It is supposed to testify [to] the artist's will to create even in . . . [his] gravest hours.

"First the visitor sees the oil picture at the gate [entrance] and then comes into a room illuminated by a mild blue light," Kaib continued. "He hears the sound of bells and harps and his heart is impressed . . . [as] he listens devotionally and he [views] . . . the nativity scene which represents the soul of the work. The Son of God lies in a straw-covered crib, born as mankind. On both sides of the crib are Marie and Joseph and praying shepherds."

The diorama was truly impressive. Columns and arches divided the low, semi-circular stage into three parts. The manger scene was the focal point of the large, central section. Leading camels and servants, the Wise Men approached from the left against a dim silhouette of Bethlehem. On the right, amidst grazing sheep, a small stream flowed down



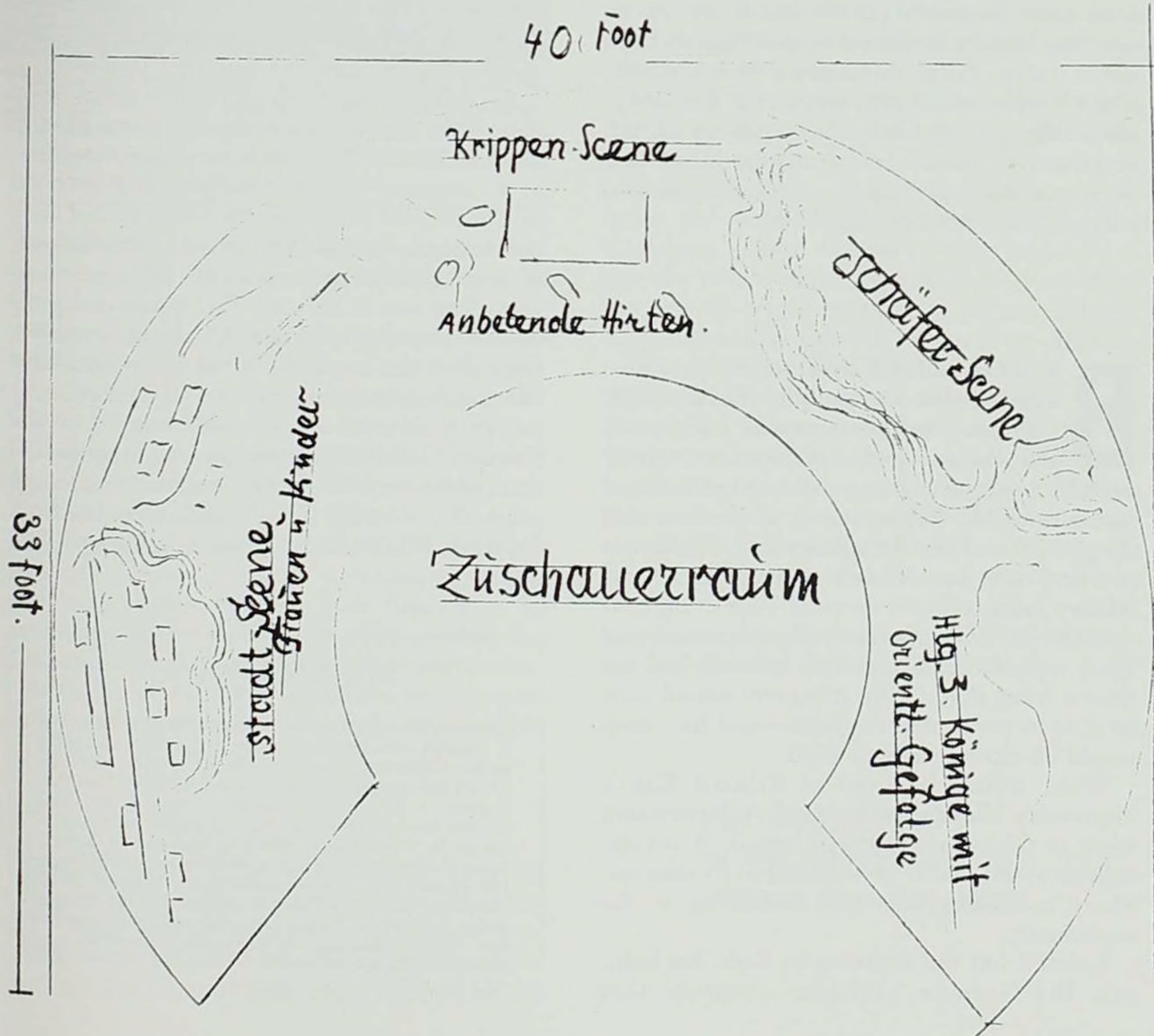
from the hills and tumbled over a miniature waterfall. Angels hovered above the manger, and startled shepherds gazed at a star-filled sky. Christmas music could be heard in the background.

"Out of the interior of the mountain," Kaib's narrative concluded, "it sounds like the voice of angels: silent night, holy night . . . 'Gloria in excelsis deo.' Angels sang this song of love and peace the first time in the Christmas of Bethlehem long, long ago. But every year at the same time this message of heaven is being heard by millions of people. And peace on earth to the men of good will."

When the nativity scene was ready, Kaib commented to Lobdell that the star of Beth-



Eduard Kaib poses with two figures from the nativity scene during summer 1945. Years later, Kaib remarked about the scene, "I made that at the darkest time of my life." Below: Kaib's original layout.





lehem was "inviting the people of the Algona community to visit the scene" and the colonel agreed. The camp public relations officer issued a press release announcing times for public viewing and quoting the camp commander. "It is a well established fact," Lobdell said, "that the German people before the time of Hitler were deeply religious and regarded the Christmas season as one of the great religious periods of the church year." *The Kossuth County Advance* published a front-page photograph of the diorama and declared that it was "probably one of the greatest Christmas scenes to be ever shown in Algona."

Nearly two thousand people from Algona trooped through wretched weather to the remodeled warehouse. Another fifteen hundred came from other Iowa towns and counties, and over a hundred viewers came from other states. Local ministers and a Catholic priest held brief worship services at the scene. How different this Christmas was from Christmas Eve 1944, when American guards huddled tensely around machine guns in anticipation of a mass escape by German POWs.

**B**Y THE TIME the nativity scene opened that December, the war with Germany had been over for half a year, and the surrender of Japan was three months past. Algona's newspapers carried accounts of the homecoming of its sons and daughters, and the first peacetime Christmas in five years was celebrated in a joyful and relaxed fashion.

At the POW camp, however, the season was filled with feverish activity. Lobdell had received word that all the prisoners would soon be sent to ports of embarkation and the camp would be closed early in 1946.

What would become of Eduard Kaib's impressive Christmas diorama? A department store in Chicago offered to buy it. A nearby college asked that it be donated to its campus. Many in Algona hoped it could stay in the community.

Lobdell left the decision to Kaib, his helpers, the German Lutheran chaplain Alex

Funke, and the POW spokesperson, Sergeant Freidrich Henkel. The group recommended unanimously that the display should remain in Algona if proper arrangements for its preservation and care could be made. They wanted their Iowa hosts to remember them through this memorial to peace, produced as a result of a painful wartime experience.

Algona's citizens responded quickly. The Junior Chamber of Commerce, the Jaycees, volunteered to relocate the scene to a building donated by the Kossuth County Fair Board and promised to exhibit it during the Christmas seasons to come. Kaib and his colleagues were delighted and imposed only one condition — no admission should ever be charged to view the work. In January 1946, German POWs and Algona Jaycees moved the scenery and heavy figures to their new location (each camel alone weighed more than five hundred pounds).

By mid-February all of the Germans were gone from the Algona camp. So were most of the Americans. Lobdell turned the camp over to an engineer officer who presided over the sale of surplus property. By June, almost all of the camp's buildings were demolished. Algona's direct experience with its prisoner-of-war camp was at an end. The continued presence of the elaborate nativity scene, however, kept alive the memory of the camp long after the site was transformed into an airport.

Kaib's nativity scene is still housed on the Kossuth County Fairgrounds and is opened to the public each Christmas season (see box on page 184). In 1958 the Men's Club of the First United Methodist Church assumed the

#### NOTE ON SOURCES

This article is based largely on documents from the Arthur T. Lobdell manuscript collection, in the possession of the author. Other major sources include the author's conversations and correspondence with Wes Bartlett, Jean Harrington, A. T. Lobdell, Gunnar Norgaard, and Dick Norton. Madeline Summitt made available written information by Eduard Kaib, which he had sent to students Angie Heldorfer and Sharon Kadow for their 1985 History Day project at St. John's Grade School, Bancroft, Iowa. Clippings, letters, and photos displayed in the Nativity Scene building in Algona provided additional information. An annotated copy of the original manuscript is in *Palimpsest* production files.



COURTESY THE AUTHOR



"Captor and captive visit" reads the caption from the December 30, 1968, *Algona Kossuth County Advance*. That Christmas, Lobdell (left) and Kaib (right) were reunited. Algonans raised money so Kaib and his family could travel from Germany to Algona.

responsibility for the nativity scene and five years later they built a new building for it on the fairgrounds.

Over the years it has attracted tens of thousands of visitors from all fifty states and many foreign countries. Brief articles about the diorama have appeared in several American newspapers and magazines. In 1953, a United States Information Agency official wrote Dick Norton, an Algona Jaycee member, that the USIA planned to use the story of the Algona nativity scene "through newspaper, pamphlets, pictures, posters, and displays in 82 countries of the world." In 1945 neither the German sergeant nor his American camp commander could have foreseen the durable popularity and quiet influence of the remarkable display.

**E**DUARD KAIB and Arthur Lobdell corresponded for some years after the war, and the colonel and his wife, Betty, sent the Kaibs care packages from time to time. The postwar years were difficult for the

German veteran. When he had returned to Germany, Kaib reported "that my wife and my little daughter had fled [from Silesia] from the Russian Army, leaving all the goods we had owned behind." Within two years his wife died of cancer, leaving him to raise his daughter Marita alone. Four years later he remarried and became the father of two more children, Norbert and Cornelia. He settled in Bielfeld, West Germany, and eventually prospered as an architect and the proprietor of a small factory producing plastic advertising items.

Lobdell was honorably discharged from the army in February 1946, and returned to his office in Lincoln, Nebraska, as administration engineer for the state's Department of Roads and Irrigation. In 1950 he suffered a stroke, but he recovered months later and continued serving as a highway department official until his retirement in 1965.

During the years after the war, several Algona citizens had corresponded with Kaib, and the Jaycees had sent Christmas parcels to him. In 1968, several Algonans raised money to bring the Kaib family to Iowa during the Christmas season and invited the Lobdells to join the celebration. Twenty-three years after the nativity scene was first displayed, Eduard Kaib and Arthur Lobdell met again in Algona.

There, surrounded by the peaceful farmlands and friendly people of northwest Iowa, the retired American colonel and the former German sergeant spent several pleasant hours reminiscing about their time together on either side of the wire fences of the old prisoner-of-war camp. Eduard Kaib's wish in 1945 — for "peace on earth to the men of good will" — seemed to have become a reality as he and the former commanding officer celebrated Christmas together for the last time in Algona. □

*For a closer look  
at the nativity scene,  
please turn the page.*



## The Algona Nativity Scene

A lot of  
space for  
such  
Kitsch



The nativity scene is open to the public from the first Sunday in December through December 31. Weekdays and Saturdays: 2 to 9 P.M. Sundays and Christmas Day: noon to 9 P.M. December 31: 2 to 6 P.M. The display is housed in the Kossuth County Fairgrounds in Algona. There is no admission charge. For more information, contact Wes Bartlett of the Men's Club of the First United Methodist Church in Algona.

The *Palimpsest* thanks Wes Bartlett for allowing us to photograph the scene and for sharing his own thoughts about it. As he remarked, "The most meaningful thing is that during a time of military conflict, those we considered our enemy and who were our prisoners wanted to create a symbol of peace."

Color photos by Chuck Greiner















